

# The Life You Can Save

Persuading you to think again.

Non-fiction comes in all shapes and sizes. We've looked at quite a few personal accounts of experience, as this is commonly set for GCSE, but you could be confronted with anything. So, this week, we're looking at an excerpt from a very different kind of non-fiction book.

*The Life You Can Save* was written by philosopher Peter Singer, a man who has been named one of "The 100 Most Influential People in the World" by *Time* magazine. In this book, he uses many different techniques to persuade readers that we have to change the way we think about world poverty.

In this excerpt, Singer tries to persuade us through ethical argument. Let's see how he does it:

## 1) Through the way he relates to the reader:

- Direct address to "you".
- Establishes his authority on the subject.
- Assumes agreement to a "common-sense" view.
- Use of rhetorical questions to make you think.
- Appeal to emotion and reader's sympathy.

## 2) Through the way he structures and supports his argument:

- Parallels between two anecdotes.
- Use of analogy to shift from concrete to abstract ideas.
- Use of impressive numbers.

## 3) Through powerful uses of language:

- Contrasting language in anecdotes; powerful in different ways.
- Immediacy of present tense narrative.

### DIRECT ADDRESS TO "YOU"

- Challenges the reader to engage with the text in their imagination.

### PARALLELS BETWEEN THE FIRST ANECDOTE AND THE SECOND ANECDOTE

- Starts by expressing similarity, but by the end you can see the contrast between your imagined action in the first anecdote and the real inaction in the second.

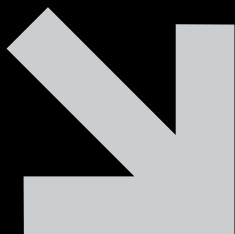
### WRITER ESTABLISHES HIS AUTHORITY

- Professional identity as a teacher of ethics, who feels entitled by that to judge other people's ethical ideas and beliefs.

### CONTRASTING LANGUAGE IN ANECDOTES

- The first anecdote is in informal and quite emotive language.
- The second is in a more objective, more formal, news-like language.
- The contrast keeps the subject varied, and also subtly shifts attention from a more informal to a more formal focus; from the engaging classroom "moral dilemma" discussion, to the much more serious business of one child's death.

## REVISION IN MINUTES



**18**

minutes

Write a three or four-paragraph response to the ethical dilemma presented here, weighing up different alternatives for action before coming to a conclusion. You'll find links to some different dilemmas to try at [www.gcseresult.co.uk](http://www.gcseresult.co.uk)

**27**

minutes

Select a topic about which you believe young people need to change the way they think. Write the text for a persuasive speech that could be given in an assembly or uploaded to YouTube.

*The Life You Can Save* is by Peter Singer, and is available from Picador, priced £8.99.

## The Life You Can Save

Peter Singer

On your way to work, you pass a small pond. On hot days, children sometimes play in the pond, which is only about knee-deep. The weather's cool today, though, and the hour is early, so you are surprised to see a child splashing about in the pond. As you get closer, you see that it is a very young child, just a toddler, who is flailing about, unable to stay upright or walk out of the pond. You look for the parents or babysitter, but there is no one else around. The child is unable to keep his head above the water for more than a few seconds at a time. If you don't wade in and pull him out, he seems likely to drown. Wading in is easy and safe, but you will ruin the new shoes you bought only a few days ago, and get your suit wet and muddy. By the time you hand the child over to someone responsible for him, and change your clothes, you'll be late for work. What should you do?

I teach a course called Practical Ethics. When we start talking about global poverty, I ask my students what they think you should do in this situation. Predictably, they respond that you should save the child. "What about your shoes? And being late for work?" I ask them. They brush that aside. How could anyone consider a pair of shoes, or missing an hour or two at work, a good reason for not saving a child's life?

In 2007, something resembling this hypothetical situation actually occurred near Manchester, England. Jordon Lyon, a ten-year-old boy, leaped into a pond after his stepsister Bethany slipped in. He struggled to support her but went under himself. Anglers managed to pull Bethany out, but by then Jordon could no longer be seen. They raised the alarm, and two auxiliary policemen soon arrived; they refused to enter the pond to find Jordon. He was later pulled out, but attempts at resuscitation failed. At the inquest on Jordon's death, the policemen's inaction was defended on the grounds that they had not been trained to deal with such situations. The mother responded: "If you're walking down the street and you see a child drowning you automatically go in that water... You don't have to be trained to jump in after a drowning child."

I think it's safe to assume that most people would agree with the mother's statement. But consider that, according to UNICEF, nearly 10 million children under five years old die each year from causes related to poverty.

### FIRST ANECDOTE IS IN PRESENT TENSE

- Gives a sense of dramatic immediacy that you start to feel part of, as if this is a real ethical decision you have to make.

### USE OF RHETORICAL QUESTIONS

- The first one asks you to think what you would do, though by using an example of a helpless drowning child, it's pretty obvious; the second is more obviously rhetorical – there is no real answer except agreement with the position expressed.
- The questions are at the end of paragraphs to leave you thinking.

### ASSUMPTION OF AGREEMENT TO A "COMMON-SENSE" VIEW

- Mother's response to the death of her son appeals to a common-sense ethical position. Both she and the writer assume this is something everyone would agree to.

### ARGUMENT BY ANALOGY

- The anecdotes are concrete and immediate; he then transfers the ideas from this onto his real argument for action against poverty, which can seem more abstract and remote.

### USE OF NUMBERS TO SUPPORT THE ARGUMENT

- "10 million children under five years old die from causes related to poverty."
- Use of large numbers makes any statement seem more authoritative, and the shift from one child's death to 10 million children's deaths is shocking.

### APPEAL TO EMOTION

- The anecdotes in the first two paragraphs – hypothetical and real – both relate to a drowning child, a highly emotive subject likely to get maximum sympathy and agreement.

next week

Zeitoun: descriptive writing uncovered.